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Deep Magic

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DEEP MAGIC

Robert Moore-Jumonville

The recent uproar of Christian parents over the good and evil wizardry described in the Harry Potter books makes one wonder whether the words "Christian magic" can be legitimately paired. Of course, G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis would not have had a problem with the concept of Christian magic. As Lewis would say through the voice of Professor Kirke, "Nothing is more probable." I think the reason writers like Chesterton and Lewis had no qualms about the notion of magic is because they were so fundamentally committed to a supernatural worldview. If one replaces the word *magic* with the word *supernatural* or *miracle*, then no dilemma exists. Conversely, the reason we are so bothered by the idea of magic is because our worldview—not the one we subscribe to in theory, but the one we practice daily—is so thoroughly naturalistic. Think of it this way: if we depict a character stepping onto a transporter beam platform, disintegrating, and then reintegrating in another spot by a stunning feat of advanced technological engineering, we stand up and cheer. But if the same feat of disappearing and reappearing is produced by the wave of a golden wand, some of us begin asking uneasy questions about the occult. Christians claim they believe in the supernatural, but mostly live as though everyday choices produced results only in the realm of natural causes and effects. Supernatural events or phenomena occur in a separate, nearly unconnected, sphere from those in the mundane world. However, there is a different worldview and logic at work in the works of Lewis and Chesterton, where "deep magic" is not only woven into the very fabric of the universe, but is also affected by the choices we humans make each day. I submit that the primary way you and I participate in this deep magic today is by speaking a no to the world that God turns into a yes.

In his masterful chapter of Orthodoxy entitled *Ethics of Elfland*, Chesterton argues against the materialist "man of science who presupposes that the cosmos is an impersonal machine operating according to scientific "laws of nature" or according to strict principles of cause and effect. The man of science assumes that this principle of cause and effect is a necessary principle; Chesterton disagrees: "We must answer that it is magic." What causes apples to fall instead of to float? We don't really know. For all we know, the next one freed from its limb may stay suspended in midair like a balloon. What is interesting for our purposes is the way Chesterton connects the idea of magic, with certain prohibitions woven into the fabric of the world.

> *For the pleasure of pedantry I will call it the Doctrine of Conditional Joy.... The note of fairy utterance always is, "You may live in a palace of gold and sapphire, if you do not say the word `cow'"; or "You may live happily with the King's daughter, if you do not show her an onion." The vision always hangs upon a veto. All the dizzy and colossal things conceded depend upon one small thing withheld. All the wild and whirling things that are let loose depend upon one thing that is forbidden.*

One can almost hear the echo of Moses' great last speech to Israel, "So choose life, that you may live long in the land!" The

part I want to point out is how human choice in this case produces certain effects (either good or evil) in the world at large.

Everything that makes for human happiness, then, depends upon our ability to comprehend the veto, the prohibition, and respond appropriately. Notice how Psalm 1, the prologue to all Hebrew and Christian piety and prayer, begins with a prohibition: "Happy are those who do not...." Human happiness, or better, blessedness, depends on the ability to "not." Eugene Peterson suggests the obvious but profound truth that humans are the only creatures with the ability to say no. Can we somehow, then, better learn to practice this skill? We do not have a very good track record if one examines history. Recall that the very fall of our race into sin occurred through just such a failure to say no. In Genesis 3, Eve knows the prohibition well enough; she repeats it to the serpent (v.3). But she allows herself to be convinced otherwise: "God knows that when you eat of it," cooed the serpent, "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." No more prohibitions; no more question marks; no more unknowns; no more noes. By eating the fruit, Eve was rejecting God as the one who decides what is good and evil, putting herself in that role instead, grasping for what was previously the prerogative of God alone. She somehow thinks herself an exception to the rule. Isn't this frame of mind the very essence of sin? It's the opposite of Kant's categorical imperative. I want everyone else to abide by the rules; to stop at red lights, and not steal my possessions; but I am an exception. In C. S. Lewis's book, ***The Magician's Nephew***, Jadis, the Witch who calls herself Queen, tells Digory and Polly how she destroyed all her people with the Deplorable Word. When Digory responds with disgust, the Witch turns on him in anger and chides condescendingly: "You must learn, child, that what would be wrong for you or for any of the common people is not wrong in a great Queen such as I. The weight of the world is on our shoulders. We must be free from all rules." If we see in this statement the choice of Eve and Adam taken to a hideous extreme, then it is distressing to realize how often it is currently being parroted by postmodern advertising as an attitude we ought to personally adopt. One can almost hear Milton's Satan or Lewis's Screwtape promoting the slogan: "Ignore the rules!"

We must understand, however, that the answer, "No" often looks to us like the positively wrong answer. Take Digory again as an example. At the end of ***The Magician's Nephew*** he is sent by Aslan on an errand to fetch a "magic" apple. As he finally reaches the tree, Digory finds the witch waiting for him, hoping to tempt him into taking the apple for himself. This is her first tactic: eat the apple and you will live forever. Digory knows too well not to trust her. But then she turns to a kind of deceit that hopes to make evil out of good. "Why not take it for your sick mother, fool," she urges. "Think what she would feel, if she knew you had the chance to save her, but wouldn't!" The witch is hoping to set in motion the same sort of qualifications and questions the serpent presented to Eve. "Did God say you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?" Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness using the same ploy. Each of the three temptations in Matthew chapter four can be easily interpreted as an invitation for Jesus to use his messianic status and power for some good, although limited, human result. According to this line of reasoning, "Turn these stones into bread" means "Feed the hungry masses." "Take for yourself all the power of the world's kingdoms" means "Bring peace and political stability to Israel like no human king

ever could." Just as with Eve, the temptation is to think one knows how to run things better than God. One usurps God's role as God.

The problem is this, if we follow the serpent's line of reasoning, a kind of reasoning that too often runs its circuit through our brains, we suddenly work our way down a path of exceptions to the rule. Perhaps that is what the author of Psalm 1 also had in mind. The Psalmist warns against the slippery moral slope that begins with someone merely taking advice from the wicked (the level of listening to and entertaining wicked thoughts); but which then proceeds quickly onto the path that sinners tread (now actually putting the thoughts into action); and which finally ends up with the person sitting in the seat of scoffers (settling into a sedentary lifestyle of habitual sinning). It should be pointed out that neither level one nor level two (taking advice or treading the sinner's path) appear satisfying at the time one is pursuing them; one is irresistibly drawn toward level three, toward total immersion in sin and self.

So what appears to be so life-affirming in the beginning ends up with total self-destruction: those who try to cling to their lives lose them. We think that saying "Yes" to the forbidden fruit is what will bring joy, but it only brings wretchedness. Aslan explains to Digory that, although the witch ate one of the enchanted apples, and so shall have "endless days like a goddess," she has only won for herself "length of misery." If Digory had given the fruit to his mother, she would have revived only to live a life of misery and torment. "That is what happens to those who pluck and eat fruits at the wrong time and in the wrong way," said Aslan. "The fruit is good, but they loathe it ever after."

We ordinarily think that saying "Yes" to the world will bring life and health and peace, but it is actually by saying "No" to the world that real life is granted. First, saying "No" is an affirmation of boundaries. And as Chesterton recommends, boundaries bring health, happiness, wholeness, and sanity. On the one hand, we must adhere to certain limits of logic. More importantly, however, if we are to find happiness, we must adhere to certain moral limits. But the limits, the prohibitions, should not overburden us with what we cannot have, but instead fill us with joy for what we do have: "Keeping to one woman is a small price for so much as seeing one woman," Chesterton exclaims. "To complain that I could only be married once was like complaining that I had only been born once." Chesterton's Doctrine of Conditional Joy states plainly: "You may live happily with the King's daughter, *if* you do not show her an onion." We tend to notice only the prohibition, only the one thing withheld, even as Eve focused only on the tree of knowledge, ignoring the rest of that great garden. But notice the promise beyond the prohibition: happiness with the King's daughter! Most modern capitalist consumerism complains about what is wanted but not yet owned. Much of Chesterton's writing could be portrayed instead as a litany of praise for what we already have. In ***Orthodoxy*** he describes Robinson Crusoe as and example of "the poetry of limits." Chesterton insists "the best thing in [Crusoe] is simply the list of things saved from the wreck." He goes on to compare the salvaged goods with all that we see existing before us.

That there are two sexes and one sun, was like the fact that there were two guns and one axe. It was poignantly urgent that none should be lost; but somehow, it was rather fun that none could be added. The trees and the planets seemed like things saved from the wreck: and when I saw the

Matterhorn I was glad that it had not been overlooked in the confusion. I felt economical about the stars as if they were sapphires.... I hoarded the hills.

So, we learn to appreciate limits and boundaries, to be grateful for them, and we respond to God's gift of limited bounty with self-restraint. "The proper form of thanks... is some form of humility and restraint: we should thank God for beer and Burgundy by not drinking too much of them."

As a matter of fact, it is ascetics like St. Francis who may actually experience the most joy and happiness in life, because by freeing themselves from appetites like lust, gluttony, and greed they have become much more capable of enjoying things like planets, stars, and sunsets.

Now, I would not want to insinuate that saying "No" to the world is an easy task. At the very least it requires a life of disciplined prayer. Saying "No" means we first must learn to pray, to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night. It was the law of the Lord (the Torah), after all, that Jesus used to dispel the temptations of Satan in the wilderness. One also must learn to control one's thoughts, to stop them at the door, so they do not move us from taking wicked advice, to taking the sinners path, until finally we find ourselves sitting down in the cynic's seat of sin. The Gospel calls us to watch, to be sober, alert, and vigilant. The promise of Psalm 1 is that we shall have help. We shall be planted by streams of water, where our spiritual roots can plunge downward and drink from the fountain of God's life-giving spirit, and where our limbs can shoot upward in praise to him whose name is above all names.

And yet, as likely as not, saying "No" will take us well beyond merely developing disciplined lives of prayer and praise; saying "No" also means taking up our cross. But I wonder if these crosses that we freely choose to carry are not part of the Deep Magic that holds the world together. Somewhere near the end of Thomas Merton's autobiography, ***The Seven Storey Mountain***, he says that it is the prayers of the monks that keeps our world from dissolving into utter chaos. I wonder. The deep magic of Narnia, the "deeper magic from before the dawn of time," was set loose to work when Aslan faced his "cross" on the stone table. Don't you imagine that when Christ was tempted the second time, in the garden of Gethsemane, the whole universe tilted and tottered on the brink of annihilation? His question was, "Father, can this cup pass from me? Can I bail out?" What would have happened if he had answered his own question with a "Yes" instead of saying as he did, "Thy will be done?" The cross is the deep magic that held our world together. In the garden of Gethsemane Christ reversed the chaos of sin and death that Eve and Adam had unleashed in their garden. As Aslan explained, the witch did not know "the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward." It is Christ's deep magic that holds our world together.

Perhaps another part of the deep magic that continues to hold our world together is when we accept our crosses "for His name's sake." Last spring a friend of mine wrote me an email describing a spiritual battle he was being dragged through. He had been reading Jeremiah—and identifying with his plight. "I have been doing some of my own lamenting," he said; "I don't particularly like the vocation God has given me." He had been called into a prophetic role which was becoming uncomfortable. So he began to complain to God (in good biblical form).

Still I felt I was standing on good ground, following the likes of Jeremiah... and Jesus, who also struggled over his vocation, who desperately wanted out if there were any way possible. And when I thought of Jesus, I knew I was done for. How could I begin to compare my vocation with Jesus'? Yet there it was. For the redemption of the world, Jesus sweat and wept out his misgivings, and went out to take up his cross. And as much as I would like to get out of it, God seems to have given me a miniature little cross or two. Much as I would like to walk away from it, it seems God wants me to be part of finding a way to [be redemptive] for others.... That's my small piece in the redemption of the world, I suspect. I don't particularly like that calling. I'll trade it if anybody out there is interested. And yet I know I can't get out of it, anymore than Jeremiah could get out of his calling, or Jesus out of his.

What my friend did not add is the thought that of course Jeremiah, and Jesus, and my friend himself, could in fact get out of carrying their crosses. But they did not. They chose instead to stay true to God. And therein lies the deep magic. Think of what is at stake in the choices we make. Think of the effect our choices produce. Mary Margaret Funk says "the desert wisdom had a sense of the unity of all persons and the impact of each of our thoughts upon that unity." Saying "No" to the dirty business deal, saying "No" to the pornography on the internet, saying "No" to the anger felt against a spouse—what ramifications are generated? Surely, when someone chooses to stay in a difficult marriage, there are blessings that spread from the spouse, to the children, to the relatives, and much farther. But perhaps there are unseen spiritual consequences as well—within our own lives, but also throughout the universe. "People have no idea what one saint can do," maintains Thomas Merton; "for sanctity is stronger than the whole of Hell." God turns our "Noes" into "Yeses."

By saying "No" we unleash a power that participates in the undoing of Eve and Adam's sin. More blessed trees are planted by streams of living water. In Eve's garden there were two trees planted by four rivers: one was the tree of knowledge, the other the tree of life. Much later in time, that other tree, the one that stood starkly on Golgotha, began as a tree of death. On that tree Christ died. But, as many medieval artists and mystics depicted it, it became the *arbor vitae*, the tree of life, the budding cross, signifying to all the particularly joyous work this second Adam had accomplished. Deep magic. The choices await us.